

Is anyone having kids during the pandemic?; There are a lot of reasons both for and against having children right now

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Body

Any time someone brings up the idea of pandemic babies on the social media feeds, someone jokes that this generation will consist entirely of first-born children.

Talk of a COVID baby bust is emerging since, anecdotally speaking, it looks as if few overwhelmed parents are busy trying for a second (or third) child, since the ordeal's already been especially hard on parents.

We found one having a second, though: Lindsay Bell, a 42-year-old assistant professor in the department of anthropology at Western University. She's working full-time and looking after a toddler and expecting her second in June. Bell and her partner had actually planned to do an in vitro fertilization (IVF) treatment when their son turned one, but the fertility clinics were closed.

"A couple of months later, once the fertility clinics opened and they offered a spot in our next month's cycle, we just assumed, very foolishly, that COVID would be over by the time the baby would appear," says Bell. "I guess my husband was really optimistic about vaccinations and I just thought, 'Yes, COVID-19 is a bad time, but it will be sorted out by the time this person actually shows up.'"

Bell's a little less confident about that now but, between her age and the fact that egg storage fees add up for cash-strapped parents doing expensive IVF, they went for it.

And you know what? It's not all bad. Although she doesn't know what the birth plan will look like, working remotely has meant no punishing commute or having to explain away all the appointments at the fertility clinic to colleagues and students, not to mention the hormone-related mood swings.

As COVID-19 has eroded our public lives, we've all been given the gift of way more privacy - for worse and, in some cases, for better. One friend, due this spring, said that while the timing is far from ideal, she was happy to be able to take naps and bathroom breaks without co-workers raising eyebrows or hovering over her, and she loved that her changing body wasn't an open invitation for strangers to comment or touch her belly.

These are some of the reasons that Nora Spinks, CEO of the Vanier Institute of the Family, says talk of a baby bust in Canada might be premature. For some parents, the right time is the right time - pandemic or no pandemic. Although the Brookings Institution in the United States is predicting a bust based on preliminary data about people having less sex and other indicators, Spinks says it's too soon to draw conclusions here.

"The interesting thing about Canada is that, because of some of the measures that have been put in place to respond to COVID-19, especially the fact that it was made easier to access maternity and parental benefits, it's hard to extrapolate from other countries," says Spinks.

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It's not just parental benefits, says Spinks. Between universal health care and a portfolio of emergency benefits for individuals and businesses, we had a fundamentally different experience of the pandemic compared to other countries and, for some, this might be the perfect time to have a baby. Spinks says midwives in Canada are fully subscribed right now, although that might be a reflection of more people simply wanting to avoid hospitals and give birth at home instead.

And, indeed, not wanting to deal with the medical system during the pandemic is a big reason parents might choose to delay having a child - be it their first, second or fourth.

"I have a friend who's expecting and all her appointments are by herself," says Andrea O'Reilly, professor at York University's School of Gender, Sexuality and Women's Studies. "Her partner sits in the car in the parking lot for all the ultrasound and other prenatal appointments. He can be there for the birth, but her mother can't be since she has to choose one, so that's hard, right?"

Although O'Reilly agrees it's still too early to know if we're looking at a baby bust, she feels it's likely, since it's not just exhausted parents who might consider delaying a second pregnancy, but also millennials, who might want to hold off on a first even further than they already have.

"Any plans to buy a home and pay off student loans have been delayed for a lot of millennials," says O'Reilly. "So are they going to be ready to have a child once this is all over? They might rethink any plans they had for children and say, 'You know, this setback has put us two years back and we have to catch up first.'"

Not all decisions to have children are made as the result of a totally rigorous and rational thought process, O'Reilly points out, but the overwhelming number of factors that are combining to make parenting hard could be a perfect storm leading to a baby bust.

Mothers aren't just overwhelmed and exhausted, many have lost their jobs, been denied promotions and had their hours reduced so they could become de facto elementary schoolteachers. And then there's just the gloom and doom of it all.

"I mean, it's a different world, right? And people are also facing those larger philosophical questions," says O'Reilly. "The pandemic is showing the vulnerability of our species and a lot of people are thinking about climate change and wondering if they want to bring kids into this world. When people are uncertain and nervous and apprehensive that's not the time they usually choose to have children."

This isn't the very first time Canadians have had concerns about the future, of course. A hundred years ago, the Great War and the first influenza pandemic, combined with a recession, took a big toll on the psyche of the population, which some historians have characterized as a reversal of our sense of human progress.

I checked historical fertility rates and, sure enough, they fell off substantially between the years 1915 and 1925. And they didn't make a comeback for decades, not until the baby boom that began after the Second World War.

Will we follow the same pattern? It's still too soon to know. But we'll leave you with a fun fact that Nora Spinks shared with us. One of the many items people stocked up on last year at the start of the pandemic was, you guessed it ... contraception.

Throughout February we'll bring you stories that take a close look at Lockdown Love. Stories of longing, of questioning, of passion, of awakening, of life-affirmation. We hope the stories bring you new insight into your own relationships or a diversion, and maybe even surprise you.

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